



United States Department of Agriculture

Gold Butterfly

Final Record of Decision



Forest Service Bitterroot National Forest R1-20-04

November 2019

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Acronyms

ACHP	Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
BMP	Best Management Practice
BNF	Bitterroot National Forest
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
DEIS	Draft Environmental Impact Statement
EO	Executive Order
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FEIS	Final Environmental Impact Statement
IDT	Interdisciplinary Team
HFRA	Healthy Forests Restoration Act
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFSR	National Forest System Road
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NRHP	National Register of Historic Places
NOI	Notice of Intent
ROD	Record of Decision
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Officer
USC	United States Code
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

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Introduction

1.1 Project Location

The Gold Butterfly project area includes 55,147 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands and is located within Ravalli County east of Corvallis, Montana in the Sapphire Mountains on the Bitterroot National Forest. There are 780 acres of private land within the project area boundary. The project area includes a portion of the Stony Mountain Roadless Area, however, no treatment activities will occur within specially designated areas (e.g., Research Natural Areas, Inventoried Roadless Areas, or Wilderness) or other ownerships.

1.2 Forest Plan

Bitterroot National Forest programmatic management direction is provided by the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, USDA Forest Service 1987). The Forest Plan sets forth goals and objectives of management actions and further directs these actions through standards and guidelines. Chapter 3 of the Forest Plan assigns a management emphasis to each area of the National Forest. Land management practices that are appropriate in one management area may be constrained in another. The Gold Butterfly project area includes all or parts of six management areas (FEIS Chapter 1, page 6).

1.3 Healthy Forest Restoration Act

This project is proposed under Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA; 16 USC §6591) authority. The project area lies within Designated Areas that were requested by the Governor of Montana and designated by the Secretary of Agriculture.

The HFRA has several titles that apply to the project:

- Title I provides for hazardous fuels reduction on Federal land.
- Title IV provides for systematic information gathering and research on applied silvicultural treatments to address the effects of insects, disease, and their interactions on forests.
- Title VI provides for the designation of insect and disease treatment areas to increase forest resilience to insect or disease infestations.

HFRA Section 603 requires the Forest Service to facilitate collaboration among State and local governments, Indian Tribes, and interested persons to encourage meaningful public participation during the preparation of the project. For this project, collaboration with the Bitterroot Restoration Committee, Ravalli County Collaborative, and involvement of Indian Tribes, agencies, and other interested parties has occurred and is continuing.

Analysis and documentation has been carried out in accordance with Section 602(d) of HFRA. Projects within the Designated Areas must “reduce the risk of, or increase the resilience to, insect or disease infestation” (602(d)(1)).

1.4 Purpose and Need for Action

Forest stands in the project area were historically shaped by natural disturbances including fire, insects and disease, resulting in a mosaic of stands with different structure and species composition. The existing condition is primarily characterized by a lack of fire on the landscape, compared with historic conditions.

Warm and dry sites have generally transitioned to more shade-tolerant species and higher stem densities, increasing risk of insect and disease epidemics, such as mountain pine beetle, Douglas-fir beetle, dwarf mistletoe and western spruce budworm, as well as high intensity fire. The departure from historic (desired) conditions on cooler sites is more subtle, but is also characterized by an increased presence of shade-tolerant conifer species and higher stand densities, with increased risk of landscape level disturbance.

Sediment levels in Willow Creek are higher than historic conditions due to human activities. The primary source of sedimentation in the project area is in the lower FS section of Willow Creek where NFSR (National Forest System Road) 364 parallels the creek for several miles. In some locations, road drainage is not functioning properly and sediment is being delivered into the stream. Willow Creek is listed as sediment impaired by the State of Montana Department of Environmental Quality and contains a population of bull trout, a federally threatened species.

Grassland habitats in the project area were historically a diverse community of bunchgrasses, forbs, and small shrubs. Today, spotted knapweed is a predominate species in grassland habitats and out-competing native species. Aspen was likely more prevalent in the project area historically than it is today in part due to a lack of fire on the landscape. Whitebark pine is a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. In the project area it is being impacted by white pine blister rust and mountain pine beetle. Additionally, whitebark pine, grassland habitats, and aspen stands, are all impacted by a lack of fire on the landscape and the subsequent encroachment of conifers into these habitats.

In response to these needs, described in detail on FEIS pages 4-6, the Gold Butterfly project would move landscape-level vegetation conditions in the project area and Forest System roads within the Willow Creek watershed toward objectives of the Forest Plan in order to increase ecosystem resilience to insect infestation and other natural disturbances, provide timber products and related jobs, reduce chronic sediment sources in the Willow Creek watershed, and restore or improve key habitats.

Decision and Rationale

2.1 My Decision

Title I, Section 104 of HFRA requires development of the proposed agency action, the no action alternative, and an additional action alternative if one is proposed during scoping or the collaborative process and it meets the purpose and need. Alternative 3 as described in the FEIS Chapter 2 was developed through project scoping and collaborative efforts. Thus, I have the option of choosing the No Action Alternative, Alternative 2, or Alternative 3.

I am authorizing the activities listed in Alternative 2 with two modifications. These modifications pertain specifically to regeneration harvest in units containing old growth. The modifications are as follows:

1. Convert 14 units with proposed regeneration harvest treatments in old growth, including clearcuts with leave trees (29 acres), seed tree cuts (50 acres), and shelterwood cuts (59 acres), to a commercial intermediate treatment. An intermediate treatment would retain and perpetuate old growth characteristics in ponderosa pine and/or Douglas-fir stands by leaving most of the large green trees and snags while removing mostly co-dominant and intermediate trees that show symptoms of susceptibility to western spruce budworm and/or other insects and diseases. In addition, an improvement harvest would strategically create canopy openings around dominant ponderosa pine trees to encourage natural regeneration of ponderosa pine.

This modification applies to the following units containing old growth: 17, 18, 23a, 24a, 25a, 25b, 25c, 28, 30a, 30b, 30c, 30d, 53, 58a

2. Convert two units with a proposed regeneration harvest treatment of clearcut with leave trees (111 acres) in old growth to a non-commercial treatment. Non-commercial treatments would remove target specie(s) within a unit up to a certain diameter limit. Treatments would favor retaining larger diameter ponderosa pine and whitebark pine and old growth characteristics.

This modification applies to the following units containing old growth: 13b, 93

No other units containing old growth under Alternative 2 were proposed for treatment through regeneration harvest. Note, treatment units other than those discussed above within the project area under Alternative 2 do contain old growth. However, these units were already proposed for treatment with intermediate or non-commercial harvest methods. Based on the modifications discussed above, all treatment units containing old growth would retain their old growth status under the selected alternative.

Summary of Changes to Units Containing Old Growth

Treatment Unit	OG Acres in Unit	Original Treatment Prescription in Alt 2	Modified Treatment Prescription
17	14	Shelterwood	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
18	2	Shelterwood	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
23a	2	Clearcut with Leave Trees	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
24a	10	Shelterwood	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
25a	9	Seed Tree	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
25b	8	Seed Tree	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
25c	16	Shelterwood	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
28	5	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
30a	15	Seed Tree	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
30b	16	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
30c	18	Seed Tree	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
30d	6	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
53	13	Shelterwood	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
58a	4	Shelterwood	Commercial Intermediate Treatment
13b	46	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Non-commercial Intermediate Treatment with 7" DBH limit
93	65	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Non-commercial Intermediate Treatment with 12" DBH limit

Summary of Vegetation Treatment Acres by Alternative

Activity	Alt 2	Modified Alt 2 (Selected Alternative)	Alt 3
TOTAL COMMERCIAL HARVEST	5621	5461	3342
Clearcut with Leave Trees	747	531	333
Shelterwood	768	653	388
Seed Tree	270	172	111
Group Selection	296	296	156
Commercial thin	765	765	635
Sanitation	517	517	431
Improvement	2258	2527	1289
TOTAL NON-COMMERCIAL	7130	7238	3228
Plantation Thinning	427	427	360
Mechanical Thinning / Fuel Reduction	64	64	64
Planting	2198	2198	1048
Non-commercial thinning associated with timber harvest units	3580	3580	938
Meadow Restoration	84	84	57
Whitebark pine Daylighting	777	885	761
TOTAL PRESCRIBED FIRE	4854	4854	2581
Prescribed fire associated with commercial harvest	4440	4440	2276
Maintenance Burn	414	414	305
TOTAL AREA TREATED¹	7376	7376	4888

¹Total Area Treated is not the sum of total commercial harvest, total non-commercial thinning, and total prescribed fire because treatments overlap between these categories. In other words, several types of treatment occur in the same units.

The selected alternative includes the Proposed Action's design features (FEIS Chapter 2, pages 11-22). These measures represent all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm. Additionally, the Bitterroot National Forest will oversee maintenance responsibilities for the entire gravel section of Willow Creek Road during project implementation. Maintenance responsibilities will be formalized with the Ravalli County Board of Commissioners through a Schedule A Road Maintenance Agreement. The Bitterroot National Forest is also committed to working with the Ravalli County Board of Commissioners to seek solutions for maintenance and repair of the paved portion of Willow Creek Road.

I have determined that my decision is consistent with all laws, regulations, and agency policy. I have considered potential cumulative effects. I believe that Alternative 2, as modified, provides the best balance of management activities to respond to the purpose and need while considering and incorporating issues and input provided by the public and other agencies.

Implementation of the Selected Alternative, as modified, will require a project-specific forest plan amendment to the 1987 Bitterroot Forest Plan to suspend certain Forest Plan standards relating to elk habitat effectiveness and thermal cover. Discussion concerning the plan amendment and its effects is found in Appendix D of the Gold Butterfly FEIS. The plan amendment is guided by the 2012 Planning Rule,

which has different provisions from the 1982 Planning Rule procedures that the Forest Service used to develop the existing forest plan.

2.2 Objection Process

The legal notice for the Notice of Opportunity to Object to the project, as well as the Forest Plan amendment, was published in the *Ravalli Republic* (newspaper of record) on July 3, 2019. Seventeen timely objections were received. Two additional objections were received in which the objector did not provide previous comments during the EIS scoping or comment period and thus did not meet the requirements of 36 CFR 218.8(b)(4). Objections included, but were not limited to, concerns about the project's purpose and need, adequacy of collaboration, log hauling along Willow Creek Road, treatments in old growth, and project impacts on wildlife, water quality, and fisheries, and impacts related to road construction and long-term maintenance. Some objectors were in support of the selected alternative and submitted an objection solely to participate in the resolution process.

A team of resource specialists from the Forest Service Northern Regional Office was assembled to review the objections, the analysis in the FEIS, and the project record. In addition, the Reviewing Officer, Deputy Regional Forester Keith Lannom, held an objection resolution meeting with objectors on August 28, 2019 to discuss potential resolution of objection issues. No resolutions were reached. The Reviewing Officer's decision on these objections was documented in his September 3, 2019 letters to the objectors. The objection response letters have detailed responses for all objection points brought forward. It is worth noting that many of the objections were polar in nature, i.e., one objector felt that the level of collaboration was inadequate while another commented the Forest Service on the high level of effort put into the collaboration process or one objected that there was too much harvest being proposed while another felt that the level of harvest was inadequate. This cross-spectrum of opinions is indicative that the decision is striking the balance between the desires of the community while still meeting the purpose and need of the project.

The Objection Reviewing Officer included instruction to me, the Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor, to review and incorporate new science regarding Canada lynx into the FEIS. I have done so by incorporating a response to literature provided during the objection process in FEIS Appendix C, pages 83-85.

2.3 Permits, Licenses, Grants, and Authorizations

All applicable federal and state permits will be obtained prior to implementation of this project. Section 404 of the Clean Water Act authorizes the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to issue permits for the discharge of dredged or fill material into wetlands. Silvicultural activities are exempt from the 404 permit process, as are associated road construction and maintenance that adhere to Best Management Practices (BMPs; 33 CFR §323.4), however, a permit will be obtained for culvert replacement to address fish passage. Treatment of noxious weeds using herbicide was authorized under a previous decision (USDA Forest Service 2003). Any required permits that are unforeseen at this time will be obtained prior to implementation. A State of Montana 318 permit (administered by the Department of Environmental Quality) will be obtained for temporary turbidity related to culvert replacements as well as a State of Montana 124 permit (administered by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks) to streambank and streambed modifications related to culvert removal / installation.

2.4 Rationale for My Decision

In making my decision, I considered the purpose and need, public issues, the project's relation to other relevant environmental documents, and its compliance with applicable law, regulation, and policy. Each aspect of my decision is discussed below. I selected Alternative 2, as modified, because it aligns with the suggestions from the Bitterroot National Forest Interdisciplinary Team (IDT), members of the public, and

the community interests as gauged through the scoping and collaborative process. Title VI of HFRA, Section 303, provides for the designation of insect and disease treatment areas to increase forest resilience to insect or disease infestations. In addition, Title VI maximizes the retention of old growth and large trees, as appropriate for forest type, to the extent that the trees promote stands that are resilient to insect and disease.

Treatments in old growth and road use and management were identified as two issues of concern. I considered significant issues and environmental impacts in my decision.

In response to treatments in old growth, I have modified Alternative 2 for the following reasons:

The regeneration harvest silvicultural prescriptions have been changed to commercial intermediate treatments or non-commercial treatments. Though not as effective, commercial intermediate treatments with an improvement harvest will reduce tree density, open the canopy, and favor early seral species with retention of existing ponderosa pine and whitebark pine trees and the opportunity for regeneration of those species. Reducing the basal area and retaining the healthiest and largest trees will increase forest resilience to fire, insects, and diseases. Large diameter trees and old growth characteristics sufficient to keep old growth status will be retained through implementation activities, and monitoring of the old growth stands will occur after treatments are completed. Non-commercial treatments with a diameter limit will also reduce basal area and improve forest resilience to disturbances, although to a lesser extent, while retaining large diameter trees and old growth characteristics; existing old growth status in these units will also be retained.

In response to road use and management, I have reviewed the potential impacts to water quality and fishes and explored alternative haul routes.

The FEIS describes the extent and duration of effects to water quality and fishes, including long-term improvements to both as a result of extensive road improvements and incorporation of Best Management Practices throughout all project activities. Design features have been included to mitigate fisheries and water quality impacts during these activities and after they have been completed.

To potentially reduce the number of log trucks hauling on Willow Creek Road, we engaged in conversations with landowners on both the Corley Gulch Road and Charleys Gulch Road. At the time of this Decision, we were unable to reach an acceptable agreement to pursue an easement or temporary road use permit. Though we remain open to alternative access if opportunity should arise in the future, our focus is to effectively manage log truck hauling impacts to the local community on Willow Creek Road, and are committed to work with Ravalli County in that regard.

My decision will result in estimated road-related sediment reductions of 47-61% in the Willow Creek watershed as a long-term result of the proposed activities. Alternative 2, as modified, will reduce the number of log truck loads by approximately 200 to 300 hauling out of Willow Creek.

In addition to addressing the two issues above and meeting the purpose and need, treatments should be economically feasible to implement. My selection of Alternative 2, as modified, considers how best to meet the purpose and need for this project, the existing conditions within the project area, environmental effects, relevant issues and concerns, and public comments. My rationale is based on the project-specific environmental analysis included in the FEIS and appendices, as well as a review of the Project Record, which shows a thorough analysis using the best available science. The FEIS lists extensive, effective, and realistic design criteria and mitigation measures that are included in Alternative 2, as modified, and will minimize potential environmental harm (FEIS Chapter 2, pages 11-22).

2.4.1 How the Selected Alternative Responds to the Purpose and Need

The purpose and need of the Gold Butterfly project is to improve landscape resilience to disturbances, provide timber products and related jobs, reduce chronic sediment sources into the Willow Creek

watershed, and restore key habitats. The selected alternative responds to the specific elements of the purpose and need.

- **Improve landscape resilience to disturbances (such as insects, diseases, and fire) by modifying forest structure and composition, and fuels:** Forest stands across the project area are currently at high risk for stand replacing wildfire and are at high risk or currently experiencing an insect epidemic such as mountain pine beetle, Douglas-fir beetle, dwarf mistletoe and western spruce budworm (WSB). Surveys show WSB is currently severely impacting Douglas-fir, spruce, and true firs in the project area resulting in needle defoliation, stunted growth, top-kill, and in some case, mortality (PF-SILV-001).

The selected alternative would change forest composition, structure, and successional stages in treated areas. The treatment goal is to promote stand resistance and resilience to disturbance and stress factors, such as insects, disease, competition, and fire in the project area. The intent is to maintain insects and diseases at endemic levels and modify potential fire behavior, by reducing burn severity. Approximately 90 percent of treatment acres are within the insect and disease treatment area designated under HFRA Title VI. Seventy-six percent of treated acres would occur within the Wildland-Urban Interface.

This purpose supports the forest-wide management goal to maintain forest stands so that pest-caused losses are reduced to acceptable levels (Forest Plan page II-4) and a forest-wide management objective to convert high-risk or insect and disease infested stands to young, healthy stands (Forest Plan page II-6).

- **Provide timber products and related jobs:** The Organic Administration Act of 1897 establishes that one purpose of the National Forests is to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of citizens of the United States. Additionally, the National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires consideration be given to the economic stability of communities whose economies are dependent on National Forest materials.

Based on these legal requirements, and on Forest Plan direction, the desired condition is that the Bitterroot National Forest supply the public with forest products. The wood products manufacturing industry provides an important service to the rest of the nation, and part of the Forest Service mission is to contribute a sustainable supply of timber.

The selected alternative is, in part, designed to produce forest products and includes 5,461 acres of commercial timber harvest. Vegetation treatments intended to improve resiliency have also been designed to generate products, where possible and compatible with other resource goals.

This purpose supports the forest-wide management goal to provide sawtimber and other wood products to help sustain a viable local economy (Forest Plan page II-3) and a forest-wide management objective to offer affordable timber sales (Forest Plan page II-6).

Reduce chronic sediment sources in the Willow Creek watershed to improve water quality and bull trout habitat in the long term: Willow Creek is listed as a sediment-impaired stream through the Montana Department of Environmental Quality's 303(d) process. The primary source of sedimentation in the project area is in the lower FS section of Willow Creek where National Forest System Road (NFSR) 364 parallels the creek for several miles. In some locations, road drainage is not functioning properly and sediment is being delivered into the stream. Poor road drainage increases the risk of catastrophic road failure during high precipitation and runoff events. Risk of failure due to poor road drainage is also an issue in some upper sections of NFSR 364 and NFSR 969 which, although not directly adjacent to a stream, could wash downslope, as occurred in the spring of 2017.

The major drainage issues are found on roads that are open to the public and receive heavy traffic and insufficient maintenance. Overall, the majority of road miles in the project area are in storage (i.e. closed to motorized use and hydrologically stabilized); they are generally not generating sediment to streams. The selected alternative focuses on improving the drainage and implementing Best Management Practices on the main travel routes that are currently open to public use and pose the highest risk to water quality and fisheries.

Improvements to drainage features and the surface of NFSR 364 and NFSR 969 (and other roads throughout the project area) are included in the selected alternative to address chronic sediment sources and reduce inputs to streams. These improvements will result in estimated road-related sediment reductions of 47-61% in the Willow Creek watershed as a long-term result of the proposed activities. See FEIS Chapter 2, pages 8-9 for details.

This purpose supports the forest-wide management goal to provide habitat to support viable populations of native and desirable non-native wildlife and fish; to maintain habitat for the possible recovery of threatened and endangered species; and to maintain riparian flora, fauna, water quality, and recreation activities (Forest Plan page II-3). The forest-wide management objective to maintain and enhance fish habitat by requiring high standards for construction and maintenance, and reducing sediment from existing roads is also supported (Forest Plan page II-5).

Restore or improve key habitats such as meadows, aspen, and whitebark pine: Grassland habitats in the project area were historically a diverse community of bunchgrasses, forbs, and small shrubs. Today, spotted knapweed is a predominate species in grassland habitats and out-competing native species. Additionally, conifers are spreading into the grasslands. The proposed treatments would reduce conifer encroachment in grassland habitats and treat existing spotted knapweed to reduce its presence.

It is likely that aspen was more prevalent in the project area historically than it is today. The reason is linked to the lack of natural fire on the landscape, discussed above. Aspen is still found on a variety of elevations and aspects, but the stems are generally suppressed by high densities of conifers that have resulted from fire exclusion. The proposed vegetation management would reduce conifer encroachment around aspen stems and clones within treatment units.

Whitebark pine is a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. In the project area it is being impacted by white pine blister rust, mountain pine beetle, and competition from other conifer species. The selected alternative would remove species that are competing with whitebark pine, as well as plant whitebark pine seedlings on suitable sites. Some of the treatment units would feature research being conducted by the Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station. The selected alternative would improve growing conditions for whitebark pine and facilitate research concerning future actions to improve whitebark pine and its habitat. Appendix A in the FEIS specifies which areas are restoration units.

2.4.2 How the Selected Alternative Considers and Addresses Public Issues

Members of the public, as well as the project ID Team, identified sediment originating from the project-related use and management of analysis area roads as a concern for water quality and fisheries, particularly bull trout occupying the Willow Creek watershed. The FEIS described the extent and duration of effects to water quality and fisheries as a result of the project, including long-term improvements to both as a result of extensive road improvements and incorporation of Best Management Practices throughout all project activities. Design features have been included to reduce fisheries and water quality impacts during these activities and after they have been completed.

The construction of roads, permanent and temporary, to implement vegetation treatments was an area of concern during project scoping and the DEIS comment period. In fact, road construction was one of two

primary issues driving the development of Alternative 3. Vegetation treatments in old growth was the other primary issue (see discussion under Rationale for My Decision on page 5 of this document). The environmental consequences of road construction were analyzed for a number of resources, including soils, hydrology, fisheries, and wildlife (see resource-specific specialist reports in Project File). Road construction was not determined to present a significant direct or indirect effect to any resource area, due in part to project design features. The re-opening of undetermined roads under Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 was also highlighted as an area of concern during the DEIS comment period. Undetermined roads were constructed for management purposes at some point in the past and represent an existing road prism on the landscape in varying degrees of natural recovery not currently managed as part of the National Forest System road network. The ID Team determined re-opening these undetermined roads to access treatment units would be less impactful than constructing new permanent or temporary roads. Similar to the construction of permanent and temporary roads, the re-opening of undetermined roads was determined not to represent a significant direct or indirect effect on resources. In addition to environmental analysis on constructing and re-opening roads, a minimum roads analysis was conducted by the ID Team. This analysis included a risk/benefit matrix that helped inform which road segments would be proposed for decommissioning, storage, or maintained in their current status for present and future management needs (PF-ROAD-009). In choosing the selected alternative, I trust that the environmental impacts of road construction have been accurately disclosed and believe the proposed decommissioning and storage activities represent an opportunity to address some road-related resource concerns.

During scoping, Willow Creek Road was identified as the primary haul route for the project area. Two other potential access points exist that would reduce haul-related traffic on Willow Creek Road. These access points would require an easement or temporary road use permit with multiple private landowners. The Bitterroot National Forest remains in discussions with landowners over use of these access roads, however, no formal agreement has been reached at this time. Based on the proposed level of commercial harvest under Alternative 2, an estimated 7,000 loaded log truck trips over the course of eight years is anticipated for Willow Creek Road. Public comments focused on concerns regarding haul-traffic generated road dust and associated air quality issues, safety due to increased traffic, and infrastructure impacts. The FEIS outlines a series of design features that would be implemented to reduce public health and safety risks (FEIS Chapter 2, page 21), including dust abatement, traffic signage, road closures during hauling (on the Forest Service-jurisdiction portion of Willow Creek Road), and restricting haul traffic through the Corvallis school zone. Additionally, the Bitterroot National Forest continues on-going conversations with the Ravalli County Board of Commissioners over anticipated road infrastructure impacts and maintenance needs during project implementation. No amount of project design features can eliminate traffic safety risks entirely. However, I feel the design features presented in the FEIS are a reasonable approach to minimizing risks to the extent practical while allowing project implementation to move forward.

2.4.3 Environmental Documents Considered in Making the Decision

A number of documents were specifically incorporated by reference into the analysis in the FEIS for this project. Among these documents are the Bitterroot National Forest Management Plan (USDA Forest Service 1987) and the 2016 Bitterroot National Forest Travel Management Plan (USDA Forest Service 2016); Forest Plan monitoring and evaluation reports; and resource reports and other supporting information and analysis. I have also reviewed and find that aspects of this project are compatible with forest management goals in the Bitterroot Valley Natural Resource Use Policy (Ravalli County Board of Commissioners 2012).

2.4.4 Applicable Laws, Regulations, and Policies

For a complete discussion of how my decision complies with laws, regulations and policy, see section 5 starting on page 12 of this document.

Public Involvement

3.1 Project Scoping

Section 603 of HFRA requires projects utilizing this authority be developed through a collaborative process that includes multiple interested persons representing diverse interests and is transparent and non-exclusive. In addition to the HFRA requirement, the standard NEPA processes for public involvement apply, and both have been implemented, in conjunction with each other, for this project.

Collaboration began by way of a public meeting on April 18, 2017 with adjacent landowners, government agencies and elected officials in the area, and any parties who had contacted the Bitterroot National Forest and expressed interest in the project to: discuss the HFRA process; how the purpose and need was developed; what types of actions were being proposed; and how and when the public would have opportunities to collaborate. An open house was then held on May 17, 2017 to discuss resource conditions and issues within the Gold Butterfly project area as well as provide information about the planning process, the proposed action, and the purpose and need. Both meetings occurred prior to scoping.

The project Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in the Federal Register on June 9, 2017 (PF-PUBLIC-043) and the scoping letter was mailed the same day. As a result of a rain event and temporary closure to the main access road, the scoping period was extended to allow for additional time to review the project area. Prior to the scoping period concluding, a field trip took place on June 21, 2017 to discuss the recent road failure, fisheries and watershed issues, trailhead relocation, road system management, off road vehicle use, and vegetation treatments.

A second field trip was held on October 23, 2017 and was attended by members of the Bitterroot Restoration Committee and the Ravalli County Collaborative, although anyone was welcome to attend. This trip followed a similar format and discussion to the first field trip.

A public workshop was held on November 30, 2017 to help the public understand how the Forest Service frames issues, and to allow the public to further identify issues and potential alternatives to the proposed action that would address the issues. This event allowed the public an additional formal comment period, and comments were included in the project record. Some of the comments and issues identified were used to develop an alternative to the proposed action.

3.2 Draft EIS

The Forest Service solicited comments on the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) from interested parties, including members of the public, other public agencies, tribal governments, adjacent property owners, interest groups, and agency specialists.

The comment period on the DEIS was held from June 15, 2018 to July 30, 2018 following publication of a Notice of Availability in the Federal Register (83 Fed. Reg. 27984, June 15, 2018). During this comment period, a public open house was held on July 10, 2018 to allow any interested party an opportunity to discuss the proposed action and concerns with Forest Service resource specialists prior to submitting their written comments. Additionally, a public field trip was held on July 20, 2018 to discuss proposed treatments in old growth stands. One hundred ten parties submitted 118 letters within the comment period. Agency response to comments on the DEIS are available in Appendix C of the FEIS.

3.3 Collaboration and Other Public Involvement

Collaboration with communities and the public is required by HFRA and has been an important aspect of this project. The District Ranger and other staff regularly attended Bitterroot Restoration Committee and Ravalli County Collaborative meetings to provide project updates and answer questions. Committee and

Collaborative members represent diverse sectors, including outdoor recreation, economic development, the forest products industry, regional environmental organizations, historical interests, sportsmen's groups, State natural resource agencies, and elected or appointed officials from county government. Updates have been regularly presented at Committee and Collaborative meetings since spring 2017.

I believe the Forest has worked diligently to ensure collaboration and public involvement through mailings, news releases, public comment periods, open houses, field trips, informal discussions with interested parties, and through Collaborative and Committee meetings, which are open to the public. See also FEIS Appendix C, Opportunity to Comment on the Gold Butterfly Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Forest Service Responses.

Alternatives Considered

4.1 Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

HFRA Title I, Section 104, requires development of the proposed agency action, the no action alternative, and an additional action alternative if one is proposed during scoping or the collaborative process and meets the purpose and need. The Gold Butterfly FEIS analyzed the No Action alternative, Proposed Action (Alternative 2), and Action Alternative (Alternative 3).

Alternative 3 (FEIS Chapter 2, pages 1-11) was developed in response to issues that could not be addressed through design criteria or changing the proposed action: road construction and vegetation treatments in old growth.

The No Action alternative (FEIS Chapter 2, page 1) assumes none of the elements of the Proposed Action would take place in the Gold Butterfly project area. Ongoing and reasonably foreseeable actions would continue, including motorized and non-motorized recreation, firewood cutting, road maintenance, noxious weed treatment, and other Forest Service administrative activities. Public comments largely did not indicate support or objection to the No Action alternative. Because of the clear, existing needs in the project area, I am unwilling to forego action.

The Proposed Action (FEIS Chapter 2, pages 1-11) was designed to respond to the purpose and need for action and to move conditions in the project area toward the desired conditions. This is the alternative I selected with modifications discussed on page 2 of this document. This alternative protects key resources while addressing the needs in the project area. My rationale for this decision is described in Section 2.3 of this document.

4.2 Alternatives Not Analyzed in Detail

Issues disclosed during public scoping used to refine the Proposed Action (Alternative 2) or develop Alternative 3 are discussed in the FEIS (Chapter 1, pages 9-10). During the DEIS comment period, several other requests were received for alternative consideration. Some of the public requested an alternative that only conducted vegetation treatments in old growth stands through non-commercial methods. Silvicultural prescriptions were developed for each treatment unit individually based on the stand conditions and the best method for moving conditions from existing to desired future conditions. We did not consider non-commercial treatment of old growth stands as an exclusive option as such a project-wide prescription of this scale would not adequately address the specific needs of individual stands. In other words, a one size fits all approach could not be effectively applied to all treatment units given the variability of old growth stand composition and conditions in the project area. Other alternative requests received during the DEIS comment period were either beyond the scope of the project or already accounted for in Alternative 2 and/or Alternative 3 (see FEIS Appendix C, Opportunity to Comment for Agency response to alternative development requests).

4.3 Environmentally Preferable Alternative(s)

Disclosure of one or more environmentally preferable alternatives is required (NEPA Section 101; 40 CFR 1505.2(b)). The environmentally preferable alternative is not necessarily the alternative that will be implemented and it does not have to meet the underlying need for the project. It must, however, cause the least damage to the biological and physical environment and best protect, preserve, and enhance historical, cultural, and natural resources.

Alternative 2 and 3 are similar in treatment acres and intensity with Alternative 3 treating fewer acres and would not construct new roads; either would be the environmentally preferable alternative. Although the No Action Alternative would not result in ground disturbance from vegetation treatments, this alternative also would not address chronic sediment issues currently impacting water quality and fish habitat in the Willow Creek watershed. Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 would result in a short term sediment increase during project implementation due to haul related traffic at secondary crossings. However, both Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 would result in a 61% sediment decrease from existing conditions following project implementation as a result of BMPs and road improvement measures (FEIS Chapter 3, pages 23-25). The fisheries analysis determined that the short-term sediment increase during project implementation would not have a significant impact to bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, or their habitat, yet the long-term reduction in sediment inputs would be beneficial (FEIS Chapter 3, pages 40-46).

The Environmental Protection Agency (Region 8) provided comments on the DEIS but did not identify an environmentally preferable alternative.

Findings Required by Laws and Regulations

The FEIS was prepared in accordance with the following laws and regulations.

5.1 Clean Air Act

The Clean Air Act of 1970, as amended (42 USC §7401 *et seq.*), protect and enhance the nation's air resources. Federal and state ambient air quality standards are not expected to be exceeded as a result of implementing the selected alternative (Air Quality Specialist Report, PF-AIR-001). This action is consistent with the Clean Air Act.

5.2 Clean Water Act

The Clean Water Act, as amended (33 USC §1251 *et seq.*), regulates dredging and filling of freshwater and coastal wetlands. Section 404 of the Clean Water Act prohibits discharging dredged or fill material into waters (including wetlands) of the United States without first obtaining a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Wetlands are regulated in accordance with federal Non-Tidal Wetlands Regulations (Sections 401 and 404). Any permits required for watershed improvement activities will be acquired prior to implementation. This project is consistent with the Clean Water Act (Watershed Specialist Report, PF-WAT-001).

5.3 Endangered Species Act

I considered impacts to federally listed or proposed species, as determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These species include bull trout (threatened), grizzly bear (threatened), and Canada lynx (threatened). Potential impacts to bull trout critical habitat was also considered. Effects on these species were analyzed in the Wildlife and Fisheries Biological Assessments prepared in accordance with the legal requirements set forth under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA; 16 USC §1531 *et seq.*). Consultation for proposed wolverine was completed using the Programmatic Biological

Assessment for North American wolverine. These effects are disclosed in Wildlife and Fisheries Specialist Reports (PF-WILD-001 and PF-FISH-001) and summarized here. The determination of the selected alternative on bull trout is may affect, likely to adversely affect. The selected alternative may affect, not likely to adversely affect grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and bull trout critical habitat.

On November 14, 2018, the U.S. Forest Service submitted biological assessments for bull trout, grizzly bear, and Canada lynx to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The U.S. Forest Service has requested initiation of formal consultation for bull trout and concurrence that the Gold Butterfly project may affect but is not likely to adversely affect grizzly bear, Canada lynx, or bull trout critical habitat. On August 6, 2019, the U.S. Forest Service received concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the Gold Butterfly project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect designated bull trout critical habitat, Canada lynx, and grizzly bear, and the project may affect, and is likely to adversely affect bull trout (PF-WILD-108).

5.4 National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA; 42 USC §4321 *et seq.*) requires federal agencies to complete detailed analyses of proposed actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The Act's requirement to prepare an environmental impact statement is designed to provide decision makers with a detailed accounting of the likely environmental effects of a proposed action prior to adoption and to inform the public of (and encourage their comments on) such effects. The FEIS analyzes the alternatives and displays the environmental effects in conformance with NEPA standards. I find that the environmental analysis and public involvement process comply with each of the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council for Environmental Quality for implementing NEPA (40 CFR §§1500-1508).

5.5 National Forest Management Act

This Act requires public involvement, and consideration and disclosure of potential environmental effects. For this project, an effort was made to reach out to the public, identify interested parties, consult with them regarding the proposed action, identify public issues and concerns, and use that information to make a well-informed and reasoned decision.

The Gold Butterfly Project environmental impact statement was conducted following the procedures and requirements contained in this Act. An interdisciplinary team (IDT) fully evaluated and disclosed the environmental effects of the proposed project based upon field study, resource inventory and survey, the best available science, and their professional expertise as demonstrated by the contents of the project record. The entirety of documentation for this decision demonstrates compliance with this Act.

I find that this decision is consistent with National Forest Management Act requirements for timber harvest, at 16 USC 1604 (g)(2)(E) and 16 USC 1604(m)(1). My finding is based on Forest Plan objectives and direction, and review of site specific conditions by agency professionals. These specialists examined the site conditions, verified inventory data, and shared their findings before assigning a silvicultural treatment.

1. Suitability for Timber Production

No timber harvest, other than salvage sales or sales to protect other multiple use values, shall occur on lands not suited for timber production [16 USC 1604 Sec.6 (k)]. Stands identified for harvest treatment in this project were examined for suitability by a certified silviculturist, soil scientist, and other resource specialists. Harvest treatments are located in areas (MA) suitable for long-term timber production as described in the Forest Plan.

2. Timber Harvest

All projects that involve timber harvest for any purpose must comply with four requirements found in 16 USC 1604 Sec.6 (g)(3)(E). I find that the prescribed treatments involving timber harvest shall only occur on lands where:

(i) Soil, slope, or other watershed conditions will not be irreversibly damaged.

The IDT fully assessed the potential effects of timber harvest on soil and water resources. The analysis is documented within the Soils and Fisheries specialist reports of the project file. The selected alternative avoids impairment of site productivity and will result in a long-term improvement to watershed conditions. This determination is supported by disclosures in the FEIS and the application of design criteria and best management practices to help prevent the loss of soil or reduction in water quality as described in the FEIS. Field inventories and analysis verified that the selected treatments will meet Regional soil quality standards.

(ii) There is assurance that such lands can be adequately restocked within five years after harvest.

Timber types and site conditions in the Gold Butterfly Project area are the same or very similar to other areas on the Bitterroot National Forest where restocking has met this requirement.

Based on this information, I find that there is reasonable assurance that all stands receiving a final regeneration harvest in the project will be adequately restocked within five years of harvest. Based on sound silvicultural practices, adequate restocking is a consideration only for final regeneration harvests. Other types of harvest, such as single-tree selection, thinning, or stand improvement cutting, do not require restocking

(iii) Protection is provided for streams, stream-banks, shorelines, lakes, wetlands, and other bodies of water from detrimental changes in water temperature, blockages of water courses, and deposits of sediment, where harvests are likely to seriously and adversely affect water conditions or fish habitat.

Upon review of the Gold Butterfly FEIS, I find that the timber harvest activities associated with the selected alternative will comply with applicable Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality standards and Bitterroot Forest Plan standards. As documented in the Water Quality and Fisheries Issues section of the FEIS, treatments involving timber harvest will not adversely affect water conditions or fish habitat.

Application of BMPs and Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas will protect water resources from harvest activities. Other project activities, such as physical road decommissioning treatments, and application of road BMPs will provide long-term improvement in watershed conditions.

(iv) The harvesting system to be used is not selected primarily because it will give the greatest dollar return.

The selected timber harvest is governed by objectives to improve forest health and stand resilience, not strictly economics. Economic factors of the project were considered and the selected alternative does have economic value associated with timber volume (PF-ECON-001). The level of timber harvest is important not only in providing jobs in the timber industry but also through indirect and induced impacts on other business sectors as well. However, I decided to implement the selected alternative not only for the economic benefits, but also because the progress it will make in improving forest resiliency while maintaining other resource values.

3. Clearcutting and Even-aged Management

When timber is to be harvested using an even-aged management system, a determination that the system is appropriate to meet the objectives and requirements of the Forest Plan must be made and, where clearcutting is to be used, must be determined to be the optimum method.

a. For clearcutting, it is determined to be the optimum method, and for other such cuts it is determined to be appropriate, to meet the objectives and requirements of the relevant land management plan. [16 USC 1604 Sec.6 (g)(3)(F)(i)]:

Even-aged management will occur and was found to be appropriate to meet Forest Plan direction. See the Silviculture specialist report for additional details (PF-SILV-001).

b. The interdisciplinary review as determined by the Secretary has been completed and the potential environmental, biological, esthetic, engineering, and economic impacts on each advertised sale area have been assessed, as well as the consistency of the sale with the multiple use of the general area. [16 USC 1604 Sec.6 (g)(3)(F)(ii)]:

Full interdisciplinary review has been completed for this project (refer to the Gold Butterfly FEIS and Project File). All treatments meet a portion of the multiple use goals and objectives in the Bitterroot National Forest Management Plan for designated Management Areas.

c. Cut blocks, patches or strips are shaped and blended to the extent practicable with the natural terrain [16 USC 1604 Sec.6 (g)(3)(F)(iii)]:

Cutting units were designed to blend with the natural environment as much as possible and meet visual quality objectives.

d. Cuts are carried out according to the maximum size limit required for areas to be cut during one harvest operation, provided, that such limits shall not apply to the size of areas harvested as a result of natural catastrophic conditions such as fire, insect and disease attack, or windstorm [FSM Region 1 supplement 2400-2001-2-2471.1, 16 USC 1604 Sec.6 (g)(3)(F)(iv)]:

Direction provided in the Region 1 supplement to FSM 2471.1 has been followed and Regional Forester approval will be obtained prior to signing the final record of decision for the units that will exceed the 40-acre opening size limitation.

e. Such cuts are carried out in a manner consistent with the protection of soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and esthetic resources, and the regeneration of the timber resource [16 USC 1604 Sec.6 (g)(3)(F)(v)]:

Cuts will be carried out in a manner that will protect soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation and heritage resources (FEIS Chapter 2, pages 11-22).

4. Stands of trees are harvested according to requirements for culmination of mean annual increment of growth.

I have determined that stands of trees authorized for even-aged regeneration harvest have all passed the age where the culmination of mean annual increment of growth has occurred. This determination is based on stand data and field investigations by professional foresters and silviculturists. Culmination of mean annual increment is not applicable to intermediate harvests (such as thinning or other stand improvement measures) or uneven-aged management.

5. Construction of temporary roadways in connection with timber contracts.

Temporary roads will be decommissioned after use, including recontouring to the natural slope and revegetating.

6. Standards of roadway construction: Roads constructed on National Forest System lands shall be designed to standards appropriate for the intended uses, considering safety, cost of transportation, and impacts on land and resources (16 USC 1608(c)).

5.6 National Historic Preservation Act

The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) provides comprehensive direction to federal agencies to identify, evaluate, treat, protect, and manage historic properties. It expands the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and establishes the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) and State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs). NHPA Section 106 directs all federal agencies to take into account effects of their undertakings (actions, financial support, and authorizations) on properties included in or eligible for the NRHP. Section 106 is implemented by ACHP regulations (36 CFR §800).

Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) was fulfilled under terms of 36 CFR §800. A cultural resource inventory report was submitted to the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and SHPO concurrence on determinations of National Register eligibility and project effect on significant cultural resources was received on April 9, 2018. Consultation with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes was completed on April 30, 2018 with no cultural concerns identified.

5.7 Other Laws and Executive Orders

Bitterroot National Forest Management Plan

To meet project goals, the proposed action will require a project-specific amendment to the Forest Plan to suspend the standard for elk habitat effectiveness and thermal cover. The analysis for this amendment is discussed in Appendix D of the Gold Butterfly FEIS.

Executive Order 11988

This order requires that federal activities generally avoid occupancy and modification of floodplains. The selected alternative will not change floodplain function or value and complies with EO 11988 (Watershed Specialist Report, PF-WAT-001).

Executive Order 11990

Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands, requires that federal activities generally avoid modification or destruction of wetlands. The selected alternative complies with EO 11990 and will not negatively affect wetlands (Watershed Specialist Report, PF-WAT-001).

Executive Order 12898

A specific consideration of equity and fairness in resource decision-making is encompassed in the issue of environmental justice. EO 12898 provides that “each federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations.” No adverse effects from the selected alternative have been identified on minority or low-income populations (FEIS Chapter 3, page 75).

Executive Order 13112

This order requires federal agencies to avoid actions that will spread invasive species unless the benefits of the actions clearly outweigh the potential harm and all feasible and prudent measures to minimize risk of harm will be taken. The analysis shows that the selected alternative will comply with this order (Invasive Plants Specialist Report, PF-INVASIVES-001).

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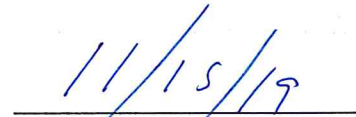
Implementation

Upon signature of the final record of decision, we anticipate project implementation to begin in the form of treatment unit layout and temporary and specified road route identification by Fall 2019 in association with the first timber sale. Vegetation treatments for this project will be carried out through several timber sales. Road BMP and improvement work will begin Spring 2020 as soon as weather and soil moisture conditions allow.

Contact Person

This document and the FEIS may be viewed and downloaded at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=51486>. For additional information concerning the decision, contact Steve Brown, District Ranger, email: steve.brown2@usda.gov or by phone at (406) 777-5461 or Jeff Shearer, Project Manager, email jeffrey.shearer@usda.gov or by phone at (406) 375-2608. For questions on the Forest Service objection process contact Amy Fox, Forest Environmental Coordinator, at the Forest Supervisor's Office, 1801 N. 1st Street, Hamilton, MT 59840, email amy.fox@usda.gov, or by phone at (406) 363-7120.

Signature of Responsible Official


Signature
Date

Matt Anderson
Forest Supervisor
Bitterroot National Forest

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